



Belarus after Election: The Naked Dictator

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Executive Summary

After March 19, 2006 Lukashenka has become victim or even hostage of his own authoritarian system. Strong (financial) support of the „siloviki” created preconditions for the unprecedented use of violence in Belarus’ history that occurred after the election. Corruption revealed itself at all levels, and corrupt decision-making and its execution, eventual evidence of corruption in the mass media, as well as after-election developments shook the „President’s Vertical” – or metaphorical „pedestal” from which he rules – and raised the question: who will be the boss in Belarus after the election?

On the other hand, the excessive cruelty of the regime enhanced human and civic solidarity. Rather than political views, simple human values created the core of this solidarity. Although this appeared to be enough to discredit the regime within society, it was not enough to change it.

Success in the democratization of Belarus depends on further coordinated efforts of the opponents of dictatorship both in and outside of Belarus. Lukashenka has undermined his political reputation, but this could have fatal consequences, if the opposition manages to take advantage of the situation. It must demonstrate negative consequences of the existence of the regime in order to inspire Belarusian population to struggle against it.

The March Sensation: A Surprise for All

Evaluation of the election outcome by Belarus' political authorities, but also independent Belarusian analysts, appeared to reach expectations, with voters mostly concerned with socio-economic issues. The majority of Belarusians, who were frightened by the persecution of regime opponents, satisfied with the existing socio-economic development, and deprived of alternative information sources, unwillingly accepted Lukashenka. Even the announcement of the Central Election Commission of the obviously overestimated support for Lukashenka has not drawn attention of the major part of Belarusian voters. For them the falsification of the election results was highly expected event, something "absolutely" natural.

However, the reaction of at least part of Belarusian youth was quite a surprise¹. The toolkit of Lukashenka's unchallenged authority includes persecutions, harassments, and threats, as well as financial rewards for political passiveness (receipt of a place of work or study, salary as an alternative to political freedom). A reasonable part of the young people has simply ignored the consequences.

Belarus' authoritarian regime is much harsher in comparison with that of Milosevic in Serbia, or that of neighboring Ukraine. Lukashenka has done everything possible to ensure "smooth" elections. Given the significant progress in Belarus' socioeconomic development on one hand, and large-scale persecutions and threats on the other, the huge crowd was a big surprise for the authorities as well as for democrats and analysts. The resistance of democrats proved that regardless of the cruelty of the regime, the government's actions remained insufficiently effective and served to consolidate the opposition and heighten the lack of information: there are still a significant number of people the authorities are not able to "buy" or frighten.

Lukashenka's Bad Mood: Unexpected Problems

At a press conference on September 10, 2001, declaring his "beautiful and elegant victory" and answering provocative questions, Lukashenka was calm and relaxed. However, at the press conference on March 20, 2006 he appeared to be strained and tensed. He was rude and hostile answering the questions of independent journalists. Differently from 2001, there were thousands protesting against him at the same time near the Palace of the Republic. Emotional excitement of the regime opponents was not Lukashenka's only concern. A certain emotional contact had been established between the crowd and Belarusian policemen.

The situation that time might have been more critical than outsiders thought. Lukashenka could lose control of the situation by resorting to physical force toward peaceful protesters. However, he could not be absolutely sure the people on the square wouldn't actively resist. He also could not be sure about the eagerness of most of the policemen to obey his orders. Many of them served in "unprivileged" police departments and thus, they might feel sympathetic toward the protesters. According to unconfirmed sources and indications², these "unreliable" police detachments were sent back to their permanent stations after March 20. Lukashenka apparently believes that a gradual weakening of the opposition due to a constant intensive pressure upon its activists to be a better alternative to large-scale violence toward opponents of the regime. The authorities were definitely able to count on the elite detachments, the special brigades of internal troops of the MIA under command of Colonel Dmitry Pavlichenko and police special troops (the Minsk OMON) under command of Colonel Jury Podobeda.³

¹ According to the author, a participant of mass protests in March, 2006, over 80% of those who took to the streets of Minsk and other Belarusian cities and towns were 18- to 32-year-old people.

² After March 20, nearby streets contained only vehicles with Minsk number plates.

³ Dmitry Pavlichenko and Yuri Podobed, mentioned in the report of Mr. Christos Pourgurides, are included in the list of senior Belarusian officials subject to a visa ban imposed by the EU and US.

The Price for Being Active: Large Scale Persecution

By the evening of March 23, 2006 about 600 people were serving administrative detention sentences.⁴ On the night of March 24, 2006, an additional 400 people, the tent camp defenders on October Square, were detained. Due to the lack of “free” cells in the probationary ward in Okrestina Street in Minsk, the detained activists were delivered to serve their sentences to Zhodino probationary ward, about 50 km away from Minsk. The use of physical force toward the detained activists appeared to be “an example of preventive war” for all Lukashenka’s opponents. Many of them were reportedly beaten up.⁵ Moreover, awful living conditions in probationary wards were designed to cause certain psychological effect over detainees.⁶

In Minsk and other regions of Belarus, KGB and MIA have launched persecutions against leaders of oppositional parties and NGOs.⁷ The authorities have been trying especially to isolate the coordinators of Milinkevich’s electoral campaign, key figures of the civil society mobilization campaign, those able to take people to the streets and organize protest. There have been attempts to interrupt the activities of Milinkevich’s headquarters: 8 out of 40 Milinkevich’s proxies were serving administrative sentences, while Viktor Korneyenko, deputy head of Milinkevich’s headquarters, was severely beaten by strangers. This indicates the possibility of targeted eliminations of opposition leaders similar to 1999.⁸

Violence in Minsk: Vying for Old Times

On March 25, after the opposition meeting, several hundreds of participants headed to the probationary ward in Okrestina Street; the authorities responded with unprecedented violence. They used rubber bullets, tear gas and noise weapons against peaceful demonstrators. More than 100 people were severely beaten and detained. Some mass protest participants were delivered to Minsk hospitals in grave physical condition.⁹ The violence might be a payback for the mass protests and justification for the information about alleged preparations for a coup d’état disseminated by KGB Suhorenko prior to the elections.

The authorities were finally able to restrain the mass violence. This measure permitted an avoidance of widespread discontent within the society. It is questionable, though, how much Lukashenka’s personal nervousness or the “siloviki”, namely Viktor Sheiman and Dmitry Pavlichenko, are responsible for the brutal attack. It is in the “siloviki’s” interest to hold the most important senior state positions, and they are therefore against any liberalization attempts. Sheiman and Pavlichenko might have taken advantage of Lukashenka’s order for dispersal of the protest and organized a slaughter. According to eyewitness accounts, Pavlichenko was waiting

⁴ According to Milinkevich’s headquarters, on March, 22, up to 180 people were detained in Minsk. Many of the mass protest participants were imposed administrative sentences. 45 people were detained while trying to deliver food and clothes to the people on the square (they were accused of violating the public order and cursing).

⁵ Many were beaten by the OMON forces and received different types of injuries. It is known that Inna Klimetko, defender of tent camp, was delivered unconscious to a Minsk hospital.

⁶ The living conditions for political prisoners are much worse than the ones for those facing criminal charges. It is known that detainees were deprived of the possibility to use things for personal hygiene. Due to alleged quarantine, probationary ward personnel refused to accept deliveries for political prisoners. Usually, there were 11 prisoners in cells designed for 8.

⁷ Uras Gubarevich, director of Brest region electoral headquarters of Alyaksandr Milinkevich, head of Brest region organization BPF, Zmitser Shimansky, director of Brest city electoral headquarters of Milinkevich, head of Brest city organization BPF, and Sergey Malchik, director of Grodno city and region electoral headquarters of Milinkevich, head of Grodno regional organization BPF were sentenced for 10-15 days in prison.

⁸ In April 1999, Gennady Karpenko, one of the UCP leaders, faced the same situation. He was attacked by strangers near his house. They hit him with a steel rod several times. He died a week later.

⁹ Sergey Otroshenko and Ales Tishuk received cranio-cerebral injuries and numerous bruises. They were delivered unconscious to Minsk hospitals.

for demonstrators to approach the gap between two abrupt hills. In this location, people could not avoid clashing with OMON forces. Peaceful protesters faced batons and rubber bullets.¹⁰

Belarus and the world were shocked to see the related TV news. The events on Freedom Day – March 25, 2006 – seriously undermined Lukashenka's reputation in Belarus. Even the majority of those who formerly trusted the official media deemed the clumsy attempts of the authorities to justify the slaughter as an obvious lie.¹¹

The cruelty of the regime has frightened mostly those voters concerned about socio-economic issues. Democracy proponents in Belarus have managed to persuade a politically indifferent part of the population to look at the opposition through their own perspective. People have started seeing people being unfairly treated, harassed and persecuted, not necessarily oppositionists. However, this indignation is latent: there is still no active resistance to the regime. Nevertheless, the Belarusian electorate has started to consolidate around the democratic opposition and the regime had been exposed as never before to the majority of Belarusians.

The Regime's Perspectives: Who is Ruling?

Given the strengthened role of the "siloviki", the authorities might resort to larger-scale violence to put an end to protest movements and stabilize the situation in the country. Therefore the use of force against the participants of the so-called "Chernobyl March" on the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl catastrophe on April 26, 2006 is a realistic scenario.

The regime will most probably choose a way of further weakening and exhausting the opposition by exerting constant pressure over its activists, despite the surprise that harassment and persecution did not intimidate those targeted, thereby not reducing the regime's recent level of arrests, house searches, job losses and expelling students combined with physical abuse. Members of un-registered organizations – initiators of "mass disorder" – will face increased harassment and persecution.¹²

However, the regime will not be able to totally eliminate the opposition. The March events clearly demonstrated the government's political weakness. By resorting to mass violence, Lukashenka only serves to discredit his regime. The question is: will the opposition be able to take advantage of this weakness? Could Lukashenka's opponents gain active support from a number of Belarusian citizens sufficient to eventually overthrow the regime?

The international situation around Belarus seems to be changing. The outcome of the parliamentary elections in Ukraine does not appear to be satisfactory for Russia: the orange "westerners" will obviously support the process of Ukraine's integration into the EU and NATO. Despite this, Lukashenka could not enjoy the previous unconditional support of the Kremlin domestically, as the Gazprom statement from March 30, 2006 regarding the increased gas price

¹⁰ It is known that members of Pavlichenko's brigade used carabines C-23 "Selezen", designed for shooting with rubber bullets and gas.

¹¹ State channels broadcasted the videotape that showed 8 allegedly injured members of Pavlichenko's brigade: casts upon clothes, pink cheeked, healthy men pretending to suffer from pain; those who had received different types of injuries (arms, legs, eyes) were placed into the same hospital ward, rather than injury-specific wards, with obviously non-hospital furniture.

¹² On March, 28, special KGB unit responsible for fight against terrorism and organized crime initiated criminal proceedings against four representatives of "Malady Front": Zmitser Dashkevich, Syarzhuk Lisichonka, Aleg Korbun and Barys Garetsky. They are charged under Article 193 Chapter 1 of the Criminal Code (unlawful organization of association or foundation and participation in their activities). Syarzhuk Lisichonak has already been detained.

clearly indicates. Nevertheless, Russia will keep playing the role of Lukashenka's advocate, defending and representing the regime's interests in the international political arena.

Perspectives of the Belarusian Opposition: Talk to the Majority

The recent developments in Belarus proved that Alexander Kazulin's, the social-democratic leader and candidate for the president, presence in Belarus' political arena is a tool for weakening the main opposition movement, centered around Alexander Milinkevich. The end of their flirtation started with by Kazulin's attack on Milinkevich on March 21¹³ and concluded with the disagreement between the two leaders on the Freedom Day. The criminal proceeding initiated against Kazulin¹⁴ and a possible sentence do not necessarily prove his adherence to "democratic values". In case of imprisonment, the privileged status as a "victim of the regime" will allow Kazulin to further split the opposition.

On Freedom Day (March 25, 2006) Milinkevich announced the launch of the new civil movement "For Freedom!" Thus, the democratic electorate remains consolidated around him. This consolidation is the biggest achievement of the democratic opposition in the past years. Additionally, tens of thousands of people took part in various forms in the March protests. Given the authorities' efforts to prevent an inflow of potential participants from the regions¹⁵, it is an unexpectedly high number. Relatives, friends, and colleagues have expressed a level of solidarity with protesters that Belarus has rarely experienced. Despite near-total control of media, the opposition will be capable to talk to the electorate through internet, phone and interpersonal communication. According to independent researchers there are up to 1,000,000 active internet users in Belarus. Their number is rapidly increasing. The significant number of people on Minsk streets in March was a result of increased level of alternative information, mainly through internet and cell phones. Flash-mobilization after the election helped to mobilize disorganized youth for the protest. However, the question is whether this will be enough to increase the number of those opposing the regime together with the possibility of direct communication with the electorate.

The opposition's increased capacity to effectively use existing information channels and hold a direct dialogue with people is utterly important. Lukashenka's opponents should pay closer attention to socio-economic issues – the major concern for the majority of Belarusian voters. Unlike the democratic electorate, they will not take to the streets inspired by "Democracy! Freedom! Justice!", slogans of Milinkevich. The opposition must solve concrete political (internal and external), social, economic and other problems. This could be presented through a sustainable system of constant communication with the electorate. Through dialogue with people working in administration and large enterprises' employees, the opposition could restore most effectively with "siloviki". This requires direct communication and careful policy consideration of problems and interests of this group.

Milinkevich criticized the opposition's communication with the electorate over the past years. According to him, the opposition wakes up usually several months before the elections, and then falls asleep again; during its time "awake," it was mostly concerned with widening its contacts within the international community. After the consolidation of the democratic electorate,

¹³ On March, 21, Kazulin publicly accused Milinkevich of being "a marionette in his wife's hands (Inna Kulei)", of being unable to express his own opinion. These videotaped allegations were broadcasted via state TV channels.

¹⁴ On March, 27, representatives of the MIA declared that Kazulin was charged under Article 342 of the Criminal Code with "Organization of group actions violating public order, and active participation in such actions". The Article envisages penalty as arrest for a term of up to 6 months, or restriction or deprivation of freedom for a term of up to 3 years.

¹⁵ Many oppositional parties and regional NGOs faced numerous searches and arrests...

Milinkevich must win the sympathy and respect of the majority of Belarusian voters – with the same structures of the opposition. Our prediction is that the key factor in this development will be played by Belarus' civil society.

Perspectives of Relationship between International Community and Belarus: Chance for Democratization

The decision to hold the Belarus election just a week before the Ukrainian one made these two cases even more interconnected. Significant number of Belarusian voters compare their own situation that of the neighbors. The majority of the Russian-speaking population of southern and eastern Ukraine deems the Belarus-Russia relationship a perfect example for the Ukrainian political elite. Russian President Putin uses his Belarusian counterpart as a “loudhailer” for Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine, demonstrating the advantages of the pro-Russia political course. Solving “Ukrainian” issue is impossible without sustainable progress on Belarus.

On the other hand Lukashenka and his “siloviki” must be aware: the West will no longer believe the “overwhelming support” of Lukashenka in his own land and will act accordingly. Russia's next steps – including opening the gas price question right after the election – made the Belarusian regime's only option to warm up relations with the West, especially the EU. Despite this necessity, Lukashenka had no other choice but to crash the opposition protest.

Compared to assistance from Russia toward Belarus, democracy assistance to Belarus from the West seems less effective and sometimes off-policy. The democracy movement in Belarus desperately needs support from international community after the election. Demonstration of international solidarity is very important. However, it is even more important to find ways to exert leverage over Kremlin-targeted assistance to Belarus. If interested in establishing closer cooperation with the West, tougher political and economic conditions must be imposed on Russia. Only in this case would Lukashenka have to stop persecution and harassment of opposition activists to avoid spoiling the relationship with the Kremlin. Nevertheless, the West should not be naive regarding Russia's future steps against Lukashenka – these will merely serve their own interest to control Belarus before the 2008 Russian presidential election. Europe must develop the same tough language with which the Belarusian and Russian regime operate with Brussels to become the same weight partner. As part of this, the international community should prepare an impact analysis of possible smart economic sanctions, a so-called “white list”, e.g. Simplification of visa procedures for Belarusian citizens and reducing the visa costs should be added to the “black list”, the visa ban for a larger number of Belarusian senior state officials then the EU has passed.

Continuing flow of democracy assistance should be target radio broadcasting to Belarus from the neighboring countries (including Ukraine), scholarships for expelled students²⁷, and most of all increased financial support for civil society and constant monitoring for effective and efficient implementation of sponsored projects should be added. Support for NGOs promoting the democratization of Belarus, and oppositional parties (through various channels) are equally important. Thus, the West can serve more effectively the Belarusian cause to bringing down the last and already naked dictator of Europe.

²⁷ According to the last available information more than 100 students have been expelled from universities due to participation in March mass protests. Most of the students, however, could face serious problems passing the summer exams.